

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

STRABANE HISTORY SOCIETY



GANDHI, STRABANE'S LEGLESS MAN

The name of James Hughes will not meet with instant recognition in the annals of Strabane. Unlike Dunlap, Wilson, O'Brien or Alexander he did not write a page of history on the world stage or influence the destiny of the Tyrone town. But in his own right he deserves a mention as he remains an interesting, intriguing yet mysterious character for those who remember the man known affectionately as Gandhi, the Man with no legs! He was a hidden gem!

Born James Hughes, some claim from the east coast of England near Grimsby, others claim he was born a Cockney within the sound of the Bow Bells in the city of London. Some claimed categorically that James Hughes came from a little known village near Evesham called Pershore in the County of Worcester, on the River Avon, born in the year 1887.

During the First World War he was involved in a most tragic rail accident while working on the railways in Canada which resulted in his legs being severed from his body. He was left with two stumps, one measuring 3 inches, the other 6 inches. He then went to live with a sister who looked after him for many years. When she was no longer able to care for him he set off on his travels.

He arrived in Derry by the G.N.R. train in the early 1930s. It seems that he had lived for a period around Portrush and Coleraine and a diary that he seems to have kept shows various camping sites in that area. At first he settled at Prehen outside Derry, then at Burdennett and finally outside Strabane. People who remember him say that, from early days, he was given a place to live on ground belonging to the G.N.R. at Roundhill on the Derry Road. He always had a great fondness for railways. He lived in a small dwelling built for him by Herdman's of Sion Mills. Mr. Hughes had no income,

only a few pounds available in his Post Office Savings book. In this he described his occupation as 'tailor' and whether that was a later trade because of his disability or whether he had always worked at it we cannot tell.

Despite his disability James Hughes was an extremely active man. He moved about the town and countryside independent of others. He used two small blocks which he held in both hands as he slid along. These blocks were twelve inch railway keys which were hard wood timbers used for packing the rails. He had a leather padding, made from a horse's collar, packed like a cushion, to support his lower body.

When travelling a distance such as a visit to the town he travelled on a strongly constructed cart. This cart was made of heavy timbers, well supported by springs and cross beams. The wooden wheels, made locally for him, were shod in heavy iron.

He kept a couple of goats and was often seen travelling with one of the goats pulling the cart. At other times he propelled himself with a long stick which he held in both hands.

In early 1963 he became ill and was admitted to Strabane Hospital. By all accounts he was an extremely difficult patient! Shortly after his discharge he was found dead at the small house at Derry Road on 3 May 1963. He was 76 year of age when he died. He had a few pounds in his possession at the time of his death; one estimate puts it at £200. On 4 May 1963 he was taken directly from Strabane Hospital for burial in a small oval-shaped coffin.

The name of Gandhi has always puzzled local people. Some people speculate that his looks resembled the Indian leader of the 40s who fought for independence for the state of India.

So it was that an English man called James Hughes lived during three decades on the Derry Road in Strabane. He was a phenomenon in that he survived against all the odds, without medical care and attention, he lived in humble surroundings in relative poverty, and in isolation, befriended by kind neighbours and friends, especially the McLaughlin & Kelly families; but maintaining his independence proudly till the end. Such was the mystic of the man known as Gandhi, the Legless Man!

By Michael G. Kennedy